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Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development

Written statement* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[30 August 2015]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Hazardous waste threatens Pacific islanders

Nearly 70 years after the start of U.S. nuclear tests and 20 years after the end of French atomic tests in the Pacific Ocean, Pacific islanders are worrying about the long term environmental impact of radioactive waste which has been stored by nuclear powers on the islands. In the Republic of Marshall Islands, people recently expressed concern that residential areas of Eniwetak Atoll have been washed over with radioactive waste, after the island was hit by Typhoon Nangka in July 2015.

Enewetak is a large coral atoll of 40 islands stretching over 80 kilometers. The atoll has been used by U.S. Army for 43 nuclear tests between 1948 and 1958. Between 1977 and 1980 a concrete dome was built on Runit Island to deposit radioactive soil and debris. Only three of the atoll's 40 islands were cleaned by US servicemen. The U.S. Defence Nuclear Agency (DNA) has carried out an eight-year-cleanup-operation, but the U.S. Congress refused to fund a comprehensive decontamination program to ensure the livelihood of the resettled local indigenous population which wanted to return to their homeland after the end of nuclear testing. The servicemen stocked the contaminated topsoil and radioactive debris in a 350-foot crater on Runit Island, covered by seals of cement. The 111,000 yards of irradiated debris are including Plutonium-239 which has a half-life of 24,000 years. This radioactive waste deposit in a crater of a nuclear bomb has never conceived to last for decades but was planned as a temporary measure until a permanent decontamination plan would have been decided and funded.

Since several years scientists and local population feared that parts of the hazardous waste deposit could break away, especially beneath the sea level. According to a 2013 report by the U.S. Department of Energy, soil around the dome is already more contaminated than its contents. Climate experts fear more danger from the exposure to extreme weather and by the impact of climate change. The atoll has been gradually submerged by the rising sea level provoked by climate change. Authorities have warned the local population to dig for copper around the nuclear waste dump because they could be exposed to harmful radiation. Scientists declared that there is a significant level of radioactive contamination in the soil and that any exposure to contamination through inhalation from dust in the soil should be avoided.

Eighteen months ago the U.S. Department of Energy has started a monitoring program, which involved regular visits to the islands and the collection of data. But Pacific islanders are blaming the US.authorities that there is not even a minimum protection around the nuclear waste deposit marking with a fence the hazardous place. After Typhoon Nangka in July 2015 has caused significant damage to homes and infrastructure on the atoll, people started fearing for their security. Fishermen complained that the cracks in the dome became bigger. They fear for their livelihood and existence because nuclear radiation would threaten their survival. Despite the fact that U.S.-experts have been reassuring the local population by claiming that the cracks didn't increase, indigenous fishermen are worried about the impact of climate change on the hazardous waste deposit.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the Human Rights Council to call on the U.S. authorities to ensure a long term solution for a better protection from nuclear waste in the Pacific Ocean in order to guarantee the livelihood of the indigenous population. Furthermore it should appeal to the U.S. authorities to launch a more comprehensive permanent monitoring program analyzing the medical, environmental and social impact of nuclear testing in the Pacific and to ensure maximum transparency in the protection of the local population.